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# Prologue

As sheep to a good shepherd, the Lord has given to man  
intellections of this present world.

Evagrios of Pontus  
*Texts on Discrimination*, #16 (EGP 1, 48)

Thoughts, like sheep, given the chance, are prone to wander aimlessly. Sheep follow one another, without any necessary sense of direction or purpose. They are often found gathered together in flocks, but each individual creature presents its own image of vulnerability and individuality. They get lost, and become sick or lame or hungry. But they can also be shepherded, thus gaining direction, and may be cared for, fed, and protected. A good shepherd will search out the lost, feed the hungry and care for the sick.

Such an image, particularly for those familiar with rural life, offers countless metaphorical and parabolic possibilities. Thus, most famously in the Christian tradition, Jesus is the good shepherd and we are the sheep of his pasture.<sup>1</sup> Evagrios of Pontus (345/346-399), however, suggests that we are all shepherds and that God has given us thoughts – or here “intellections” – as sheep to be cared for.

It is a much neglected, and somewhat disconcerting, facet of the extended metaphor of sheep and shepherd, at least in relation to the New Testament of Christian scripture, that the sheep are, at the end of the day, there for the shepherd, or for the one whom the shepherd serves, and not primarily the other way around. In ancient times, as now, sheep were kept for their wool and lambs for meat. Then, although less commonly now, lambs were killed for sacrifice. Unless they are the victims of sickness, or of marauding wolves, sheep and lambs are eventually put to death. Perhaps this reality



betrays an intended irony when the Jesus of John's gospel expresses his willingness to lay down his life for his sheep? However, returning to the metaphor of thoughts as sheep that human beings shepherd in their minds, can we say that these sheep are there for the benefit of those who think them, or for those whom the thinker serves, rather than for their own sake?

The answer to this question will depend upon theology and philosophy for it could well be argued, amongst other things, that the thoughts are simply there for no purpose or that they are there for the benefit of those who think them, or that they are ultimately there for the glory of God. Perhaps it is a little more helpful, however, to ask what the purpose might be of shepherding these thoughts? Surely most people shepherd their thoughts with a purpose in mind? That purpose might be to serve their own advantage, or to serve the benefit of others, or to serve God, or perhaps it might be for some other purpose. However, the fact is that we do shepherd our thoughts and that we perceive ourselves as doing so for a reason. No matter how much they wander randomly, become sick, follow the wrong leader, or otherwise misbehave, it is a feature of the inner life of human beings that we do keep trying to shepherd our thoughts in particular ways with particular purposes in mind. The writing and the reading of this text are but one example of this amongst an infinite number of possible examples that could be taken from the thoughts that humans have, whether communicated in speech or writing or remaining secret within our own minds and souls.

Furthermore, the shepherding of thoughts is something which we perceive as uniquely and characteristically human and as deeply intimate. To talk about the ways in which we shepherd thoughts within our own inner space is to talk about something which gets to the heart of what it means to be human and also – at the individual level – to the heart of what it means to be “me”. Thoughts are very personal and yet, because they wander like sheep, going to places to which we perhaps wish they hadn't gone, we may be ashamed of them and not want other people to know about them. Undoubtedly most of us, most of the time, only share with others those thoughts that we feel pleased with, or at least which are not embarrassing. We talk about the ones that are shepherded in ways that we think others will approve of, but not about the ones that get lost, or the ones that we took to prohibited places. Our conversation about the shepherding of our thoughts, if not the actual business of



shepherding, is strongly determined by a sense of what is socially acceptable.

In a post-Freudian world, we are aware that much of what we “think” is unconscious and that the unconscious world – of which we are generally not explicitly aware, but about which we are generally uneasy – has characteristic ways of making itself felt: in dreams, in slips of the tongue, in humour and so on. Indeed, so familiar are we now with this concept that we feel less ashamed than we used to of confessing thoughts that Freud has led us to believe we need not be ashamed about. Or, at least, we are less ashamed of some such thoughts some of the time, for we now seem to spend much more time in western society talking about sex, but much less time talking about death, for example.

Applying this Freudian knowledge to our metaphor of thoughts as sheep and ourselves as shepherds, we might say that we don’t always know where our sheep have gone, but we are often vaguely aware that there are some missing. Or else we might be more ready to admit pasturing sheep in some places than in others. But, still, the process of tending this flock is very important to us and we spend much – if not all – of our waking life giving it our attention.

Where, then, does this extended metaphor take us?

It is used here primarily for two reasons. Firstly, it facilitates an introduction to talking about why our inner world is important to us as human beings and yet why we also often do not speak about it. Secondly, however, the quotation with which it began is taken from one of the earlier contributions to a collection of texts known as the *Philokalia* – an anthology of spiritual writings from the Eastern Christian tradition, spanning the fourth to the fifteenth centuries C.E.

*Philokalia* means literally “love of the beautiful”, but is usually understood in Greek as referring to an anthology of works.<sup>2</sup> Today, reference to the *Philokalia* is usually taken, unless specified otherwise, to denote a particular anthology assembled by two Greek monks in the eighteenth century, which was first published in Venice in 1782.<sup>3</sup> The compilers, Nikodimos of Mount Athos (1749-1809) and Makarios of Corinth (1731-1805) apparently chose their texts with a view to making more widely available that which would be helpful in the spiritual life, drawn from the hesychastic tradition. This tradition, broadly understood, seeks to find an inner stillness of the soul – away from the distractions of thoughts and desires – within which contemplation of God might be undertaken and,

eventually, union with God found. In other words, it is a tradition of Christian prayer which emphasises attention to the inner life, the life of thoughts, with a view to the purpose of contemplating God himself. To quote from another contributor to the *Philokalia*, Maximos the Confessor, and following the same metaphor used by Evagrios, within this tradition: ‘sheep represent thoughts pastured by the intellect on the mountains of contemplation’.<sup>4</sup>

The intention here, then, is to explore the ways in which this collection of texts might help with the process of shepherding thoughts or, to be less allegorical, the ways in which the tradition expressed within this collection of texts might assist in developing a Christian understanding of the inner life of thoughts and of nurturing mental well-being. Necessarily, this exploration does not confine itself to the inner life – the *Philokalia* talks of virtue in Christian living and not only of thoughts and desires. However, it does emphasise the life of prayer as the only basis on which Christians can properly understand the inner life or conceive of mental well-being. It thus assumes from the outset that the central, primary and underlying purpose for which Christians will properly and beneficially shepherd their thoughts is that of loving, serving and worshipping God. It also assumes that the shepherding of thoughts for other purposes – such as human happiness as an end in itself – will always be more or less unsatisfactory. However, whilst these are fairly major assumptions, which atheist shepherds of thoughts such as Freud would undoubtedly disagree with, it is not intended that they should hide this exploration away from a critical encounter with other shepherds and other traditions. On the contrary, such encounters are exactly what is intended here.

These assumptions do recognise, however, that complete objectivity is not attainable, either in the inner life or in academic discourse. An observer must occupy a particular position in order to observe and an awareness of the subjectivity of the space which one occupies is, it is contended here, not a weakness but rather a strength. There may, then, be other reasons for my use of the metaphor of sheep and shepherd as an introduction to this work. In fact, perhaps there is a necessity – rather than merely the possibility – of other reasons for my beginning in this way. If I approach this work from an academic perspective, I must also necessarily approach it as an exploration of my own inner world from within the Christian tradition to which I belong. This will surely reveal that there must be other reasons for



my choice of this particular metaphor – reasons which are either concerned with my own conscious sense of vocation to be a shepherd of thoughts, or else perhaps my own unconscious thoughts around this theme (the “sheep” that I am only vaguely aware have “gone missing” from the fold of my consciousness). Perhaps – as I hope – these reasons concern my sense of purpose in combining a vocation to the priesthood with a training in clinical psychiatry and academic study, all of which seem to me to have this theme in common. Or perhaps – although I consciously deny it – they concern an attempt to find connections where there are none, to cover up the aimlessness of the mental wandering of my own thoughts like lost sheep. The point is not so much that either of these reasons is necessarily correct as that there are various possible reasons which are more concerned with the subjectivity of my vocation to write than the actual purpose of writing this particular text for others to read.

This subjectivity of writing is not eliminable from this text, but neither is it entirely unhelpful. Because of it, I approach the *Philokalia* with a view to being challenged by its discourse as to the ways in which my own thoughts may better be shepherded. If I do not allow the texts of the *Philokalia* to challenge me in this and other ways, as I also myself challenge them with a spirit of critical academic enquiry, the encounter is false. Indeed, to talk about a subject such as this and to remain entirely unaffected, or to avoid altogether any examination of its impact upon the understanding of one’s own thoughts, would seem rather dishonest. This is, after all, itself primarily an attempt to shepherd thoughts for a particular purpose – that of understanding better how the inner life may be understood and developed. Although the circularity of this process might seem to some to be undermining of objectivity, it is the reality of the process in which the compilers and authors of the *Philokalia* themselves engaged and in which they invite us to join them. Whilst I will not be uncritical of these fellow authors, I trust that I will show enough respect to take seriously what they have said to me.

I have wondered (my thoughts wandering like lost sheep perhaps?) what other metaphors might have been used to introduce this subject. As much of the writing was undertaken on Holy Island, in Northumberland, I looked across the beach and saw rocks scattered across the sea shore like sheep scattered across a pasture. I considered my own walks across these beaches and the way in which one’s attention is divided between an intended destination



across the beach and the immediate task of finding a firm footing for one's next step. It is easy to go astray from the former goal because of the necessity of the latter task. Rocks on the beach, like thoughts in the mind, are necessary as a basis for moving forward, but can easily also lead away from the place to which one intended to travel. But the need to find a firm footing does not invalidate the destination or refute the evidence of the eyes. It speaks only to human limitation.

Do such images assist in the examination of a subject which, since Freud, has become the subject of a vast and diverse technical literature? The possible answers to that question will be left for later consideration, but an unprejudiced examination of a pre-Freudian and pre-modern literature and the wisdom that it contains cannot avoid examining the possibility that they do assist in reaching a final destination; whereas, perhaps, the more technical tools of our contemporary academic discourse may confine themselves more to finding the next rock on which to stand.

The writers of the *Philokalia* sought a final destination by means of taking individual steps with care. To the best of my ability I have sought to follow that example in my writing on this subject. This book may therefore be considered as comprising six steps towards the goal of understanding what the *Philokalia* has to tell us about mental well-being and the shepherding of thoughts. These steps are:

1. In Chapter One I give consideration to influences that have helped to shape the writing of the *Philokalia*, its compilation, its teachings on the inner life of thoughts, and the foundations upon which it has been built. I do not feel that the teaching of the *Philokalia* on the inner life can be properly appreciated without this contextual information.
2. In Chapter Two, I focus on the teaching of the *Philokalia* on thoughts of a particularly troublesome kind, which the *Philokalia* refers to as "passions". I have started here partly because this is such a central theme of the *Philokalia*, but also because it is where human beings start in trying to order their thoughts. It is a study in the unruliness of human thoughts, their tendency to go astray, and the nature of the challenge that they present to those who wish to shepherd them.



3. In Chapter Three, my controlling metaphor turns from rural life to the world of medicine, and I consider the remedies for the passions that the *Philokalia* prescribes.
4. Chapter Four might be considered a glance towards my final destination, rather than a step forward. However, if it is a step forward, it is the step of understanding how the *Philokalia* conceives mental well-being. In the medical terms of the previous chapter, it is concerned with better understanding health in order to be better equipped to treat the disease of the passions.
5. Chapter Five steps aside from the *Philokalia* in order to give consideration to the contemporary world of psychotherapy. What is psychotherapy, how does it conceive mental well-being, and what does it aim to achieve? The possibility of understanding the as providing a kind of psychotherapy is then considered. This raises questions about the nature of the soul, or self, and human concerns with inwardness and reflexivity.
6. Chapter Six attempts to explore the relationship between thoughts and prayer. When the *Philokalia* is consulted as a source of reference on thoughts, or the inner life, it always turns the focus onto prayer. When it is consulted as a source of guidance on prayer, it turns the reader's attention towards a careful examination of their thoughts. This relationship therefore seems to be central to the *Philokalia*. It is studied here with reference to the preceding discussion on psychotherapy, and also by way of a brief exploratory engagement with some other western strands of thought, on philosophy (Paul Ricoeur on hermeneutics) and spirituality (Denys Turner and *The Darkness of God*).

In the Epilogue, reflecting briefly on the steps that have been taken, we shall return to the theme of shepherding thoughts and ponder where our journey has taken us.

I will close this introduction with one final quotation from the *Philokalia* on the theme of sheep and shepherds, this time from Ilias the Presbyter:

Where fear does not lead the way, thoughts will be in a state of confusion, like sheep that have no shepherd.



Where fear leads the way or goes with them, they will be under control and in good order within the fold. Fear is the son of faith and the shepherd of the commandments. He who is without faith will not be found worthy to be a sheep of the Lord's pasture.<sup>5</sup>

Here, then, is the question to be addressed. How does the *Philokalia* teach us that we can control and order thoughts that are confused, difficult to control and in disorder?

# Influences and Foundations

Explorations of the inner world of human beings might reasonably be expected to be dependent upon the outer world in which they live: its culture, its history, traditions, assumptions, language and beliefs. Such things influence the way in which we perceive ourselves and thus, at least potentially, the way in which we think. If we are to understand properly what the authors and compilers of the *Philokalia* had to say about the inner life it would therefore seem to be important to consider the nature of their outer world, and especially its anthropological assumptions and beliefs. However, this immediately presents a problem, for the *Philokalia* is the work of about 40 authors, and two compilers, whose lives span well over a thousand years. Can anything be said about “their world” which might go beyond vague generalities or spurious over-generalisations?

It might be tempting to emphasise the importance of tradition to Byzantine civilisation and Orthodox Christianity as reason for expecting continuity of fundamental assumptions across even a thousand years and more of writing. However, it has famously been suggested that “to represent Byzantium as immutable over a period of eleven centuries is to fall into a trap set by Byzantium itself”.<sup>1</sup> We must also remember that, during the period in question, some very significant events took place – not least the seven universally agreed ecumenical church councils and the great schism of 1054. The doctrinal, and especially the Christological, controversies that raged during this period variously affect different works within the *Philokalia*. For example, one work attributed to Neilos the Ascetic in the original Greek *Philokalia* is now known to have been by Evagrios of Pontus (345/346-399), but transmitted under the name of Neilos because of the tainting of reputation of Evagrios by his association



with Origenist heresy. Almost at the other end of the chronological span of the *Philokalia*, the writings of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) show evidence of his concern to defend the hesychast tradition itself from its critics. Maximos the Confessor (580-662), the single biggest contributor of texts, was exiled and tortured for his defence of the doctrine of the divine and human wills in Christ, in keeping with the Council of Chalcedon. He was only vindicated at the 6<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council, almost 20 years after his death. The historical contexts and doctrinal preoccupations that emerge from place to place within the *Philokalia* are thus varied indeed, and in some places represent fierce controversies of their time.

In an introduction to the English translation of the *Philokalia*, the translators and editors suggest that there is an inner unity to the *Philokalia* which is conferred more than anything by recurrent reference to invocation of the name of Jesus (or the Jesus Prayer as it is now known). They argue that this is “one of the central forms of the art and science which constitute hesychasm” and that this is evident even in some of the earliest texts.<sup>2</sup> It is again tempting to draw from this a reassurance as to common underlying assumptions within the *Philokalia*, but that would certainly be premature. The Jesus Prayer is but one theme amongst many to be found in these texts and it is hardly clear that it is a major theme in the earlier texts, even if it might be argued that evidence of it is to be found in them. It would seem in any case unlikely that a tradition of spirituality dating back to the fourth century would not have undergone at least some changes in emphasis and development of ideas – especially in view of the vicissitudes of its history. Thus, for example, the later texts would seem to show evidence of the influence of the Syrian spirituality introduced in the thirteenth/fourteenth century revival, an influence which exerts its own distinctive emphasis on these later texts.

A glossary provided in the English translation to the *Philokalia* also implies that there is a consistency of terminology throughout its span of writings. There is no doubt that this glossary provides helpful clarification for the reader who is new to the *Philokalia* and its world of thought, and that there is a terminology with which a reader gradually becomes familiar when reading and re-reading the *Philokalia*. However, greater familiarity begins to suggest that the appearance of consistency is almost as much confusing as it is helpful. Thus, for example, the glossary helpfully points out that even such a fundamental term as “passion” refers on the part



of some writers to something intrinsically evil, but on the part of others to something fundamentally good, something which may be redeemed.<sup>3</sup> Again, the helpful analysis of the process of temptation<sup>4</sup> refers to various sources, both from within the *Philokalia* itself and also John Climacus's *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, but careful study of these sources shows a heterogeneity of understandings, albeit with some core terms (such as "provocation" or "assent") which are used more or less consistently.

It is not, however, necessary to be completely nihilistic as to the possibility of grasping something of an understanding of the common assumptions that have formed the understanding of life in the inner world that is such a central theme of the *Philokalia*. Firstly, there have been historical, philosophical and theological influences, which appear to have provided something of an enduring source of reference to its authors. Secondly, there is evidence of internal consistency in regard to certain significant fundamental assumptions and themes – of which the Jesus Prayer is but one.

It would therefore appear helpful here to give some further consideration to the following:

1. The compilation and history of the *Philokalia* as an anthology of texts
2. The anthropology of the *Philokalia*
3. The tradition of the Desert Fathers
4. The work of Evagrius of Pontus
5. The use of scripture by the authors of the *Philokalia*

To some extent these might be considered as external influences that helped to shape the *Philokalia*, but to some extent (especially in the case of Evagrius) they are internal to its fabric. They are therefore considered together here, partly as formative external influences and partly as foundational stones upon which the *Philokalia* was erected.

### **1. Compilation, Translation and Evolution of the *Philokalia***

The hesychastic tradition, from within which the *Philokalia* emerged, has a long history. From as early as the fourth century C.E. the term



“hesychia” was used by Christian monastic writers to refer to a state of inner quietness to be achieved in prayer as preparation for communion with God. From the sixth to the eleventh centuries in the Byzantine world a “hesychast” was simply a monk or ascetic, and hesychasm referred simply to a broadly contemplative approach to prayer. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there was something of a spiritual revival, centred on Mount Athos, in which Gregory of Sinai (1258-1346) and Gregory Palamas took a leading role. This gave birth to a movement now known as the “Hesychast Tradition”, which drew upon traditions of Christian spirituality both from Syria and the Egyptian desert fathers.

The hesychastic tradition came under fierce attack in the fourteenth century, primarily because of an assertion that prayer of the heart can lead to a vision of Divine Light; a light which, it was asserted, can be seen even in this life, and by human eyes in a literal physical sense. This light, it was further asserted, is identical to that which surrounded Christ on Mount Tabor in his transfiguration. Gregory Palamas, a contributor to the *Philokalia*, was a leading – and eventually successful – defender of the tradition against these attacks. Hesychasm was formally adopted at the Councils of Constantinople (1341, 1347 and 1351) and subsequently became an accepted part of Orthodox spiritual tradition.<sup>5</sup>

The compilation and dissemination of the *Philokalia* in the eighteenth century represented a significant component of a renaissance of the hesychastic tradition.<sup>6</sup> The *Philokalia* was compiled by Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and Makarios of Corinth, both of whom belonged to the spiritual renewal movement of the “Kollyvades”. This movement was traditional and conservative, critical of liberal teaching of the enlightenment, and enthusiastic for the spirituality and theology of the Fathers of the Eastern Church. However, Nikodimos at least was not so conservative as to prevent his drawing upon western sources in his own writings.<sup>7</sup>

Makarios was born in 1731 in Corinth and was named Michael at his baptism. He was educated in Corinth and eventually became a teacher there himself. In 1764 the Archbishop of Corinth died, and Michael was elected his successor. In 1765, in Constantinople, he was ordained Archbishop and renamed Makarios. As Archbishop he began a series of reforms, including prohibition of clergy from holding political office, and measures to ensure that the clergy were properly educated. The outbreak of the Russo-Turkish war



in 1768 forced Makarios to leave Corinth and although peace was restored in 1774 another Archbishop was appointed in his place and he never resumed his position there. In 1783 Makarios anonymously published *Concerning Frequent Communion of the Divine Mysteries*, in which he argued the case of the Kollyvades in favour of more frequent reception of communion than the two or three times each year that had become customary. The book was hastily condemned by the Ecumenical Patriarch but later (in 1789) approved and recommended by a new Patriarch. The last years of his life, from 1790 to 1805, were spent almost entirely in a hermitage on Chios where, according to Cavarnos, he “[subjected] himself to severe ascetic struggle, practicing interior prayer, writing books, confessing and counselling people, instructing them in the true Faith, inciting them to virtue, and offering material help to those in need”.<sup>8</sup>

Nikodimos was born in 1749 on Naxos, one of the Aegean islands. He was educated initially on Naxos, and from the age of 15 years at Smyrna, where he learnt Latin, Italian and French. In 1775 he went to Mount Athos and became a monk. It was in 1777 that Makarios visited Athos and gave him the task of editing the *Philokalia*, and also two other works,<sup>9</sup> although in fact the two men had first met some years earlier on the island of Hydra. Nikodimos went on to become a prolific author, editor and translator of other theological works.<sup>10</sup> Nikodimos’ last years were spent in writing, and it is as an author, translator and compiler that his life most stands out. However, there is also no reason to doubt the testimony that he practiced mental prayer assiduously throughout his 34 years on Mount Athos.<sup>11</sup> It would not seem unreasonable to speculate that his introduction to the *Philokalia* by Makarios in 1777 exerted a lifelong influence upon him.

Clearly the selection of texts for inclusion in the *Philokalia* is a very significant matter, but we know surprisingly little about how the selection was made. Constantine Cavarnos first reports a traditional view that it was compiled by monks on Mount Athos in the fourteenth century, but then goes on to assert that Makarios himself was the real compiler.<sup>12</sup> Certainly it is clear that Makarios was the more senior editor and that the initiative for the work came from him and not from Nikodimos.<sup>13</sup> We might speculate that the selection was not actually made by Nikodimos and Makarios, but rather already existed in some way as a collection of texts revered by tradition.



or else already assembled by earlier compilers. Alternatively, Ware has suggested, there may have been a policy of including rare or unpublished texts.<sup>14</sup>

We do know that the texts were drawn from the libraries of Mount Athos. The introduction by Nikodimos refers to “manuscripts which had been lying inglorious and moth-eaten in holes and corners and darkness, cast aside and scattered here and there”.<sup>15</sup> In this introduction, Nikodimos also describes the purpose of the *Philokalia* as being the provision of a “mystical school” of mental (or “inward”) prayer<sup>16</sup>:

This book is a treasury of inner wakefulness, the safeguard of the mind, the mystical school of mental prayer.... an excellent compendium of practical spiritual science, the unerring guide of contemplation, the Paradise of the Fathers, the golden chain of the virtues.... the frequent converse with Jesus, the clarion for recalling Grace, and in a word, the very instrument of theosis.”<sup>17</sup>

The full title of the original Greek *Philokalia* is:

The Philokalia of the Neptic Saints gathered from our holy Theophoric [“God-bearing”] Fathers, through which, by means of the philosophy of ascetic practice and contemplation, the intellect is purified, illumined, and made perfect.<sup>18</sup>

The English translators of the *Philokalia*, commenting on the title and subtitle, suggest that it is through “love of the beautiful” that the intellect is “purified, illumined and made perfect”, and that it was this purpose of purification, illumination and perfection that governed the choice of texts.<sup>19</sup> The texts of the *Philokalia* are thus, they argue, “guides to the practice of the contemplative life”.<sup>20</sup>

Kallistos Ware,<sup>21</sup> one of the English translators of the *Philokalia*, has suggested that reflection on its contents enables us to deduce something about its scope, its aim and the means that it recommends to those who wish to achieve its aim. The scope of the *Philokalia* he understands as being defined by its focus on the inner life, characterised especially by the concepts of *nepsis* (watchfulness) and *hesychia* (stillness). The aim of the *Philokalia* he identifies as deification. The means to this end he identifies as being a life of unceasing prayer from the depths of the heart, exclusive of all



images and thoughts, in which the name of Jesus is invoked, and in which particular physical techniques (see, for example, Chapter 3, p.147) may or may not be employed.

Ware further suggests that the spirituality that emerges from the *Philokalia* has four characteristics:

1. A predominant influence of Evagrios and Maximos
2. A basic antinomy between the knowability and unknowability, the immanence and transcendence, of God which might be regarded as “Palamite”, although preceding the time of Gregory Palamas
3. An absence of western influence
4. A relevance to all Christians

Whilst questions remain about exactly what guided the inclusion and exclusion of particular texts, the overall thrust of the *Philokalia* would therefore seem fairly clear. This is an anthology of eastern Christian texts designed to assist in the inner life of prayer.

All the texts included in the *Philokalia* by Nikodimos and Makarios were originally written in Greek, except for two by John Cassian, which were translated from Latin into Greek during the Byzantine period. We may count 62 texts included in the *Philokalia* (see Appendix 1).<sup>22</sup>

The authors were undoubtedly all men (although the actual authorship of some texts remains in dispute) and all belonged to the monastic tradition. Cassian is the only “western” author included. The single biggest contributor was Maximos the Confessor, followed by Peter of Damaskos. About some of the authors we know much; about others, however, we know little or nothing with any certainty. We may calculate that there were approximately 40 or more authors in all (see Appendix 2). Attributions of authorship of some texts in the original Greek edition are now known to be incorrect. In several cases we know that contributions were made to particular texts by two or more authors.

The *Philokalia*, as a compilation of the original Greek texts, prepared by Makarios and Nikodimos, with an overall introduction and with notes to introduce the texts associated with each author, was published in a single volume in Venice in 1782 at the expense of John Mavrogordatos, Prince of Moldo-Wallachia.<sup>23</sup> A second edition was produced in Athens in 1893, including some additional texts by



Patriarch Kallistos. A third edition was produced in five volumes, also in Athens, in 1957-1963.<sup>24</sup>

The first translation of the *Philokalia*, into Slavonic, was made by Paisius Velichkovsky (1722-1794),<sup>25</sup> and was published in Moscow in 1793 under the title *Dobrotolubiye* and under the sponsorship of Metropolitan Gabriel.<sup>26</sup> Velichkovsky was a Ukrainian monk who lived on Mount Athos from 1746-1763. He was later abbot of large monasteries at Dragomirna (1763-1775) and Niamets (1779-1794) in Romania and was the initiator of a spiritual renaissance there within the hesychastic tradition.

During his time on Mount Athos, Velichkovsky developed a concern to find, copy, collect and translate patristic texts. Initially this seems to have arisen out of an inability to find a suitable spiritual instructor (or starets). Starchestvo (or eldership) was a key element in the hesychastic tradition.<sup>27</sup> However, as Velichkovsky was unable to find someone suitable as his own starets, he seems to have turned to patristic writings as an alternative source of instruction.<sup>28</sup> The concern for patristic texts that he acquired in this way early in life continued during his later life as an abbot in Romania, by which time he seems to have had literally hundreds of monks working on the tasks of copying and translation.

Velichkovsky's *Dobrotolubiye* was not a complete translation of the Greek *Philokalia*. Only 27 of the 62 works comprising the latter were included in copies of the first edition, although a few additional texts by Patriarch Kallistos were included.<sup>29</sup> A second edition was published in 1822 (almost 30 years after Velichkovsky's death). A further 13 works from the Greek *Philokalia* were included in the second edition and in at least some copies of the first edition.<sup>30</sup>

It is clear that Velichkovsky's interest in patristic works was one that he shared with the compilers of the Greek *Philokalia* and also that he knew of their interest. In a letter of uncertain date to Archimandrite Theodosius of Sophroniev, Velichkovsky wrote of Makarios' fervour and care in the process of seeking out and copying patristic books on Mount Athos, a process that led to the publication of the *Philokalia*.<sup>31</sup> It is also clear that Velichkovsky's interest in these texts predated by many years the assignment by Makarios to Nikodimos in 1777 of the task of compiling and editing the Greek *Philokalia*. Whether we may accept the conclusion of the editors of the biography of Velichkovsky (written by his disciple Schema-monk Metrophanes) that in fact it was Velichkovsky who imparted



to Makarios the knowledge of what to look for, the purpose of the search, and awareness of the value of the texts would seem much more debatable.<sup>32</sup> However, it is clear that Velichkovsky's translation work began very many years before the *Philokalia* was published in 1782. We might speculate that a loose collection of texts existed prior to the interests of both Velichkovsky and Makarios.

Subsequently, the *Philokalia* was translated into Russian. There are widespread references in the literature to an alleged Russian translation by Ignatii Brianchaninov (1807-1876), published in 1857.<sup>33</sup> However, according to Kallistos Ware it would seem that this translation does not in fact exist.<sup>34</sup> A Russian translation by Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894) was published in Moscow from 1877-1889 in five volumes, also under the title *Dobrotolubiye*.

Theophan<sup>35</sup> studied at Kiev Academy and entered monastic orders in 1837. After two months he was ordained priest and subsequently became a schoolteacher. Like Makarios, he demonstrated an openness to western scholarship and was widely read. In 1850 he was appointed as a member of the Russian Official Commission to Jerusalem. In the course of this work he travelled widely and was able to visit a series of ancient libraries, which he found to be neglected and unappreciated. He developed a knowledge of French, Arabic, Greek and Hebrew which enabled him to read and catalogue the rare manuscripts that he found. It would seem that it was at this stage in his life that he developed an interest in early ascetic Christian literature.

In 1859 Theophan became Bishop of Tambov, and then in 1863 Bishop of Vladimir. In 1866 he became Prior of Vysha monastery. Three months later he was released from his responsibilities as superior in order to become a recluse and in 1872 he entered almost complete seclusion. During his time in seclusion Theophan engaged in a prolific correspondence and also published a number of important works, including *Unseen Warfare* (a revision and translation of an earlier Greek translation of Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat and Path to Paradise* made by Nikodimos) and the Russian *Dobrotolubiye*.

Theophan's *Dobrotolubiye* represented a considerable expansion of the Greek *Philokalia*, from 1,200 to 3,000 pages, published in five volumes.<sup>36</sup> Whilst it included a number of additions not to be found in the Greek *Philokalia* it also omitted a number of texts.<sup>37</sup>

The *Philokalia* was later translated into Romanian by Father Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993), and published between 1946 and



1991 in twelve volumes under the title *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile sfintilor Parintsi*. The additions to the Romanian *Filocalia* are even more numerous and extensive.<sup>38</sup>

Stăniloae was born and lived his whole life in Romania but received theological education in Athens and Munich. He became a professor of theology in Bucharest and published 90 books, 275 theological articles and numerous other translations, reviews, lectures and other items over a period of some 60 years.<sup>39</sup> Stăniloae had a particular interest in the works of Gregory Palamas. Along with many other clergy, he was imprisoned from 1958 to 1963 by the communist authorities as a political criminal. Four volumes of his translation of the *Philokalia*, based on the first two volumes of the Greek *Philokalia*, were published prior to this imprisonment, during the period 1946 to 1948. The fifth volume did not appear until 1976. However, after the translation of the Greek *Philokalia* was completed (with the publication of the eighth volume in 1979)<sup>40</sup> Stăniloae continued to work on four more volumes, incorporating works by a number of authors not included in the original Greek version.<sup>41</sup>

Modern translations of the Greek texts of the *Philokalia* have also appeared in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Finnish and Arabic, and the Greek text may now be consulted in a modern fifth edition.<sup>42</sup>

If our speculation that a loose collection of texts already existed prior to 1777 is correct, then the apparently free additions of texts to Russian and Romanian translations might be taken to suggest something of a living tradition. Within this tradition, additions to a core *Philokalia* were apparently either not considered inappropriate, or else were thought necessary because of unavailability of the supporting texts that would originally have been found alongside the *Philokalia* in the library of Mount Athos.<sup>43</sup>

## 2. Anthropology

In his *Republic*, Plato (c.347-247 B.C.E.) argues for a tripartite understanding of the human soul or mind (ψυχή).<sup>44</sup> Both in the course of Plato's argument, and also in our own experience, two of these elements are easier to understand than the third. All three are more akin to motives than to "parts" in any anatomical sense. The first is reason, a reflective and rational element (λογιστικόν).



The second is irrational appetite (ἐπιθυμητικόν) – which includes desires such as hunger, thirst and sexual drive, orientated towards satisfaction and pleasure. The third (θυμικόν), including apparently varied motives such as anger, indignation, ambition and a sense of what is “in the heart”, the so-called “incensive” power, might be translated “spirited” – although the use of such a theologically loaded word in the present context would inevitably be confusing. For Plato, the immortal soul was understood as being imprisoned, during this life, in its physical body.

The Platonic understanding of the soul has been very influential upon Christianity in general, and in particular the tripartite model of the soul appears to have influenced the *Philokalia*, almost from beginning to end. However, before we give consideration to this in more detail, it is important to say something about the relationship between body and soul.

The *Philokalia* not infrequently, but perhaps mainly in its earlier texts, refers to an apparently tripartite model of human beings, usually as body, soul and spirit, or as body, soul and intellect. Thus, for example, in the text attributed to Antony the Great (but probably actually of Stoic origin), and placed as the first text in the original Greek *Philokalia*, we find:

Life is the union and conjuncture between intellect, soul and body, while death is not the destruction of these elements so conjoined, but the dissolution of their inter-relationship; for they are all saved through and in God, even after this dissolution.<sup>45</sup>

Again, in Evagrius:

Let the virtues of the body lead you to those of the soul; and the virtues of the soul to those of the spirit; and these, in turn, to immaterial and principal knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

However, this impression of a tripartite anthropology appears to be either unrepresentative or illusory as there seem to be many more references to human beings as simply body and soul (or, sometimes, body and intellect),<sup>47</sup> and it is clear that this is because the spirit, or intellect, is seen as being merely a part of the soul. Thus, for example, in the aforementioned text attributed to Antony we find:

The body, when it is united with the soul, comes from the darkness of the womb into the light. But the soul,



when it is united with the body, is bound up in the body's darkness. Therefore we must hate and discipline the body as an enemy that fights against the soul.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, although it was clearly believed by the original compilers to be an authentic work of Antony, the English translators of the *Philokalia* have placed this work in an appendix on the basis that there is no evidence of Christian authorship, but rather that it appears to be a collection of Stoic and Platonic texts written between the first and fourth centuries C.E. (The negative Platonic view of the soul as imprisoned in the body is clearly evident here.) However, the understanding of human beings as body and soul seems to provide the generally pervading anthropology of the *Philokalia*, and the tension between the body and soul is often evident. For example, in *Theoretikon*, [Theodoros the Great Ascetic] writes:

What, then, is the nature of our contest in this world? The intelligent soul is conjoined with an animal-like body, which has its being from the earth and gravitates downwards. It is so mixed with the body that though they are total opposites they form a single being. Without change or confusion in either of them, and with each acting in accordance with its nature, they compose a single person, or hypostasis, with two complete natures. In this composite two-natured being, man, each of his natures functions in accordance with its own particular powers. It is characteristic of the body to desire what is akin to it. This longing for what is akin to them is natural to created beings, since indeed their existence depends on the intercourse of like with like, and on their enjoyment of material things through the senses. Then, being heavy, the body welcomes relaxation. These things are proper and desirable for our animal-like nature. But to the intelligent soul, as an intellectual entity, what is natural and desirable is the realm of intelligible realities and its enjoyment of them in the manner characteristic of it. Before and above all what is characteristic of the intellect is an intense longing for God. It desires to enjoy Him and other intelligible realities, though it cannot do this without encountering obstacles.<sup>49</sup>



Elsewhere, the tension between body and soul is even more marked, as in the reference by Theognostos to “war between body and soul”,<sup>50</sup> or else more positively construed, as in Peter of Damaskos:

We should marvel, too, at how the body, that is not its own animating principle, is, at God’s command, commixed with the noetic and deiform soul, created by the Holy Spirit breathing life into it (cf. Gen. 2:7).<sup>51</sup>

Here, and in other places,<sup>52</sup> the relationship between body and soul is seen as parallel to that between God and human beings. God/soul provides the “animating principle” or life to that which would otherwise be inanimate or lifeless. Similarly, in Gregory Palamas, the divine quality of the soul, albeit set in contrast to the material nature of the body, is emphasised in the context of the doctrine of creation:

So great was the honour and providential care which God bestowed upon man that He brought the entire sensible world into being before him and for his sake. The kingdom of heaven was prepared for him from the foundation of the world (cf. Matt. 25:34); God first took counsel concerning him, and then he was fashioned by God’s hand and according to the image of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). God did not form the whole of man from matter and from the elements of this sensible world, as He did the other animals. He formed only man’s body from these materials; but man’s soul He took from things supracelestial or, rather, it came from God Himself when mysteriously He breathed life into man (cf. Gen. 2:7). The human soul is something great and wondrous, superior to the entire world; it overlooks the universe and has all things in its care; it is capable of knowing and receiving God, and more than anything else has the capacity of manifesting the sublime magnificence of the Master-Craftsman. Not only capable of receiving God and His grace through ascetic struggle, it is also able to be united in Him in a single hypostasis.<sup>53</sup>

This vision of the divine soul in union with a physical body created by God is in tension, however, with the condition of the soul and body as they exist after “the fall”. Thus, Gregory of Sinai writes:



When God through His life-giving breath created the soul deiform and intellective, He did not implant in it anger and desire that are animal-like. But He did endow it with a power of longing and aspiration, as well as with a courage responsive to divine love. Similarly when God formed the body He did not originally implant in it instinctual anger and desire. It was only afterwards, through the fall, that it was invested with these characteristics that have rendered it mortal, corruptible and animal-like. For the body, even though susceptible of corruption, was created, as theologians will tell us, free from corruption, and that is how it will be resurrected. In the same way the soul when originally created was dispassionate. But soul and body have both been denied, commingled as they are through the natural law of mutual interpenetration and exchange. The soul has acquired the qualities of the passions or, rather, of the demons; and the body, passing under the sway of corruption because of its fallen state, has become akin to instinct-driven animals. The powers of body and soul have merged together and have produced a single animal, driven impulsively and mindlessly by anger and desire. That is how man has sunk to the level of animals, as Scripture testifies, and has become like them in every respect (cf. Ps. 49:20).<sup>54</sup>

Much of what the *Philokalia* has to tell us about the inner life depends upon this basic anthropology of body and soul created by God in union with each other, but also in tension with each other; fundamentally good, but also fundamentally distorted and corrupted by the fall. Whilst, as we have seen already, there are variations in emphasis amongst different contributors to the *Philokalia*, which is only as one would expect, this basic understanding seems to pervade the texts. Sometimes the emphasis is more on the goodness of creation, sometimes more on its corruption as a result of the sin of Adam. The sense of tension between body and soul, and within the soul, is however more or less ubiquitous.

As for the soul itself, the tripartite Platonic model is adopted throughout, almost completely without any deviation or dissent.<sup>55</sup> In English translation, these parts are usually rendered as the “intellect” or “intelligence”, the “desiring” or “appetitive” power,



and the “incensive” power. The latter two are often referred to as the “passible”, or irrational, aspects of the soul, implying greater vulnerability to passion (πάθος – about which, more later). However, this does not imply that the intellect or intelligence is not also susceptible to passion, and the passions are sometimes classified according to which of these three parts of the soul they primarily affect.

At this point, various clarifications are required, for things are not quite as simple as has been portrayed so far. In particular, the nature and terminology of Plato’s “rational” element of the soul, as understood by the authors of the *Philokalia*, requires some further elaboration. According to the glossary in the English translation of the *Philokalia*, this part of the soul is to be referred to as the “intelligent” (λογιστικόν) aspect or “intelligence” (λογικόν). However, in practice, the authors of the *Philokalia* often also refer to it as the “intellect” (νοῦς).<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, both of these terms are clearly distinguished from “reason” (διάνοια), a term which is never used by authors of the *Philokalia* as a name for this part of the soul.<sup>57</sup>

Reason is clearly distinguished from intellect and intelligence. As the translators and editors of the English edition make clear in their glossary, it is:

the discursive, conceptualizing and logical faculty in man, the function of which is to draw conclusions or formulate concepts deriving from data provided either by revelation or spiritual knowledge (q.v.) or by sense-observation. The knowledge of the reason is consequently of a lower order than spiritual knowledge (q.v.) and does not imply any direct apprehension or perception of the inner essences or principles (q.v.) of created beings, still less of divine truth itself. Indeed, such apprehension or perception, which is the function of the intellect (q.v.), is beyond the scope of the reason.<sup>58</sup>

This becomes clear in, for example, usage of the term by Ilias the Presbyter:

By means of intellection the intellect attains spiritual realities; through thought the reason grasps what is rational. Sense-perception is involved with practical and material realities by means of the fantasy.<sup>59</sup>



The intellect, however, is described in the English glossary as the “highest faculty” possessed by human beings, through which they may perceive spiritual realities. Rather than operating through use of rational or abstract processes, it discerns Divine truth by direct experience or “intuition”. It is the means by which human beings may engage in contemplation.<sup>60</sup>

In distinction from this, the Greek root of the word for intelligence betrays its even closer association with Divine reality – with the Λόγος himself. It is used with reference to the possession of spiritual knowledge. It is the “ruling aspect” of the intellect.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, for example, Maximos the Confessor writes, in *Various Texts: C2*:

Every intellect girded with divine authority possesses three powers as its counselors and ministers. First, there is the intelligence. It is intelligence which gives birth to that faith, founded upon spiritual knowledge, whereby the intellect learns that God is always present in an unutterable way, and through which it grasps, with the aid of hope, things of the future as though they were present. Second, there is desire. It is desire which generates that divine love through which the intellect, when of its own free will it aspires to pure divinity, is wedded in an indissoluble manner to this aspiration. Third, there is the incensive power. It is with this power that the intellect cleaves to divine peace and concentrates its desire on divine love. Every intellect possesses these three powers, and they cooperate with it in order to purge evil and to establish and sustain holiness.<sup>62</sup>

Here, intelligence, desire and the incensive power represent the three powers of the intellect, where “intellect” appears effectively to be synonymous with “soul”.<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere, the intellect is distinguished from the soul,<sup>64</sup> or else described as being in various other relationships to it. It is referred to as being in the depths of the soul,<sup>65</sup> as being the “eye of the soul”,<sup>66</sup> as being “the pilot of the soul”,<sup>67</sup> as being “consubstantial” with the soul,<sup>68</sup> the illumination of the soul,<sup>69</sup> and as capable of being united with the soul.<sup>70</sup> The relationship is therefore not a simple one, and the descriptions of it, at least in the *Philokalia*, do not appear to be entirely consistent.



The place of intelligence, however, is to restrain the intellect and the passions,<sup>71</sup> to contemplate virtue,<sup>72</sup> and to cleave to God himself.<sup>73</sup> But this purpose can only be fully understood in the context of the incarnation of the Λόγος who has created, and re-created, all things, including the human λογικόν:

The Logos of God, having taken flesh and given our nature subsistence in Himself, becoming perfect man, entirely free from sin, has as perfect God refashioned our nature and made it divine. As Logos of the primal Intellect and God, He has united Himself to our intelligence, giving it wings so that it may conceive divine, exalted thoughts. Because He is fire, He has with true divine fire steeled the incensive power of the soul against hostile passions and demons. Aspiration of all intelligent being and slaker of all desire, He has in His deep-seated love dilated the appetitive aspect of the soul so that it can partake of the blessings of eternal life. Having thus renewed the whole man in Himself, He restores it in an act of re-creation that leaves no grounds for any reproach against the Creator-Logos.<sup>74</sup>

The Platonic tripartite model of the soul is thus very much in evidence in the *Philokalia*, but it is also clear that it has been utilised for a Christian purpose – that of understanding the inner life of human beings in the context of the incarnation of God in Christ.

### 3. The Desert Fathers

For three centuries Christians suffered persecution. At first (until about 64 C.E.) this was at the hands of Jewish authorities, then at the hands of the Roman empire. Christianity seems widely to have been disapproved of in the Roman world, and Christians were referred to as “atheists” because of their failure to believe in the Roman gods. At times this disapproval was associated with mob violence. Successive emperors and governments made it a capital offence to be a Christian, banished Christians, confiscated their property, sent them into the arena to fight as gladiators, tortured and imprisoned them. Churches and copies of scripture were burned. Periods of respite were brief, until in 311 Galerius, Caesar of the east, issued an Edict of Toleration. Although his successor Maximinus attempted



to counteract this edict, his efforts were largely ineffective and in 313 he also issued notices of toleration. Emperors in the west, first Maxentius and then Constantine, followed suit and in 313 the latter drew up an edict of toleration similar to that of Galerius.<sup>75</sup>

It is perhaps hard for many Christians today to imagine what it must have been like to live, and die, under the persecution experienced by Christians during these first three centuries, although it is also easy to exaggerate. For example, persecution of Christians in Russia in the twentieth century might arguably have been much worse. Nonetheless, many died, and some renounced their faith. Many, but not all, lived on the social edges of society. For them, the injunction of Jesus that they should deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow him can hardly have seemed metaphorical.<sup>76</sup> It would seem also that such Christian communities lived in eager anticipation of the expected return of Christ. In this context, there is evidence that from the early third century C.E. onwards some Christians, although at this stage they should not be considered to have adopted a “monastic” life, deliberately chose a poor, celibate and ascetic lifestyle in order that they may devote themselves more fully to their Christian vocation as they understood it.<sup>77</sup>

At the beginning of the fourth century C.E., with the edicts of toleration, and then the adoption of Christianity by Constantine, everything changed. Christianity was now a legal and acceptable part of the fabric of society. Undoubtedly, many Christians found this difficult to accommodate. Increasingly, some – perhaps many – chose to retreat into the deserts of Syria, Palestine, and especially Egypt, where they could devote themselves to prayerful waiting for the return of Christ.<sup>78</sup> One contemporary account states:

One can see them in the desert waiting for Christ as loyal sons watching for their father.... There is only the expectation of the coming of Christ in the singing of hymns.... There is no town or village in Egypt and the Thebaid which is not surrounded by hermitages as if by walls.<sup>79</sup>

Many of these Christians lived as solitary hermits – perhaps most famously Antony of Egypt, whose subsequently highly influential life was written by Athanasius.<sup>80</sup> Others lived in coenobitic communities, and from this developed a Christian tradition of monasticism which eventually, at least partly through the influence of John Cassian



(c.365-c.433), had an important influence upon the whole western European monastic tradition.<sup>81</sup>

Amongst the desert hermits, coenobites and monks of the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., there developed a focus on the inner life – upon the presence of sin in the human heart, the need for forgiveness, virtue in human living, and prayer. Many, perhaps most, of these Christians were not learned. Their focus was upon a simple, practical, life of prayer and certainly not on writing or academic study. Indeed, the impression is sometimes given that writing and study were positively frowned upon.<sup>82</sup> However, various kinds of literature did emerge from this tradition.<sup>83</sup> In particular, there are the “*Lives*” of various saints (especially that of Antony of Egypt by Athanasius, c.355-362), accounts of travels to the Egyptian desert (especially the *Lausiac History*, c.419/420, and the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, c.394/395), various kinds of instructional literature (notably that by Evagrius and Cassian), and letters from various authors (including seven by Antony of Egypt and 14 by Ammonas). The pinnacle of traditional monastic literature, however, is to be found in the sayings, proverbs and anecdotes of those who lived in the Egyptian desert, which were recorded, edited and passed on. Collections of these sayings appeared in the late fifth century and in the sixth century, which are now known as the “*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*” or the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.<sup>84</sup>

The life of the Desert Fathers was severe. They lived in small huts or caves and undertook basic manual work such as rope or basket making. They ate and drank extremely little, they forsook sleep in favour of prayer and, of course, they gave up the possibilities of marriage and family life. Renouncing of material possessions was a fundamental step, and most did not even have a copy of the Bible, but would rely for prayer and meditation on such passages as they had committed to memory. Most of their time would be spent alone, and remaining alone in ones cell was often emphasised as being of fundamental importance to the spiritual life.<sup>85</sup>

Sayings that have been handed down frequently take the form of a question – usually posed by a visitor or by a more junior brother to an older and wiser “Abba” or, in some cases, “Amma”. The responses given to such questions vary between the obscure, profound, apparently rude, and extremely harsh. Because they are usually located in particular circumstances, many of which were not be recorded, different sayings can also appear contradictory of each



other. However, they also reflect extreme humility, compassion, wisdom and, at least sometimes, humour.

In some ways, the *Philokalia* and the sayings of the Desert Fathers are worlds apart. A five-volume anthology hardly compares with a largely oral tradition that had a suspicion of books and learning. However, possession of the *Philokalia* potentially avoids the need to own, or have access to, a large library.<sup>86</sup> Some of the “centuries” of texts in the *Philokalia* also have a literary quality about them which is not dissimilar to that of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. They have similar ascetic concerns, they both appear to be intended as a basis for prayer and living, rather than academic study, and they employ a not dissimilar terminology of the inner life of thought and prayer and virtue.

Thus, for example, we might compare Abba Theonas and Hesychios the Priest on prayer and the passions:

Abba Theonas said, “When we turn our spirit from the contemplation of God, we become the slaves of carnal passions.”<sup>87</sup>

Whereas, in *Watchfulness & Holiness* by Hesychios, we find:

Contemplation and spiritual knowledge are indeed the guides and agents of the ascetic life; for when the mind is raised up by them it becomes indifferent to sensual pleasures and to other material attractions, regarding them as worthless.<sup>88</sup>

Such common ground should, of course, not be surprising. Apart from the general observation that the Desert Fathers might be considered the founders of Christian monasticism or, if this is debated, at least that they influenced its subsequent course very considerably, and that the *Philokalia* emerged from that same monastic tradition, there are also more direct links to be found.

At least three of the earlier authors of the *Philokalia* had in fact lived in the Egyptian desert themselves. Isaiah the Solitary was probably not the contemporary of Makarios of Egypt that Nikodimos considered him to be, but probably did live at Sketis in Egypt in the fifth century C.E., before moving to Palestine, and therefore can be said to represent firsthand experience of the tradition of the Desert Fathers.<sup>89</sup> Evagrios of Pontus went to Egypt in 383 C.E. and spent the remaining 16 years of his life first at Nitria and then at Kellia.



During this time he was a disciple of Makarios the Great (also known as Makarios of Egypt) and also had contact with Makarios of Alexandria.<sup>90</sup> John Cassian lived in Egypt from c.385/6 to 399, during which time he was a disciple of Evagrios. He subsequently travelled to Constantinople and then spent the remainder of his life in the west. He founded two monasteries in Marseilles and wrote two books, *The Institutes* and *The Conferences*, based upon his experiences in the Egyptian desert, abbreviated parts of which are included in the *Philokalia*.<sup>91</sup> Although between them these three authors contribute a little less than a third of only the first volume of the *Philokalia*, they are the first three books in the English translation and are the earliest contributors.

In addition to Isaiah, Evagrios and Cassian, it seems likely that Mark the Ascetic also spent some time living as a hermit in the desert, although in fact we know very little about him.<sup>92</sup> The *Philokalia* also includes a paraphrase by Symeon Metaphrastis of homilies that purport to be by Makarios the Great, whose sayings feature prominently in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. However, it would now seem highly unlikely that Makarios was in fact the author of these homilies.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, it is of note that the opening work of the original Greek *Philokalia* was one attributed to Antony the Great. Although this is now known not to have been written by Antony of Egypt, it would seem reasonable to assume that it may have suited the compilers of the *Philokalia* very well to place first in their work a text by this most famous of the Desert Fathers.

In addition to the contributions to the *Philokalia* by those who had firsthand experience of the desert tradition, it is clear that there is a more pervasive influence. For example, Peter of Damaskos (whose works effectively provide a “mini-Philokalia” within the *Philokalia*) quotes the Desert Fathers some 30 times,<sup>94</sup> and Nikiphoros the Monk quotes from the lives of a number of the Desert Fathers in *Watchfulness & Guarding*.<sup>95</sup> The Desert Fathers also exerted an indirect influence on writers such as Maximos the Confessor, the single largest contributor to the *Philokalia*, although this is not always explicitly acknowledged.<sup>96</sup> But perhaps the most important direct and indirect influence comes from the perceptiveness of Evagrios of Pontus. There can be little doubt that his spirituality and psychology influenced all the subsequent writers whose works were included in the *Philokalia*.<sup>97</sup> It is therefore to Evagrios that we must turn next.



#### 4. Evagrios of Pontus

If you are a theologian, you will pray truly; and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian.<sup>98</sup>

Evagrios was born in Pontus, in Cappadocia, but moved in 379 to Constantinople where he studied under Gregory Nazianzen.<sup>99</sup> By this time he was possibly already a monk. Although, up until this time, he appears to have shown much promise as a theologian, he left the city in 382 having begun an affair, albeit perhaps unconsummated, with the wife of a prominent local figure. Fleeing to Jerusalem he came close to abandoning his monastic vocation altogether, but was persuaded not to by Melania the Elder, a prominent Roman widow and foundress of a double monastery. Perhaps also with her encouragement, Evagrios left Jerusalem in 383 for the Egyptian desert, where he was to remain (apart from brief excursions to Alexandria and elsewhere) until his death.

Evagrios spent his first two years in Egypt in the desert at Nitria, one of the major monastic centres of the time. He then retired to the even more remote centre of Kellia, where he became a pupil of Makarios the Great, one of the most famous of the Desert Fathers. During his time here he subjected himself to a severe regime, which probably damaged his health. He would sleep only four hours each night, walking back and forth and keeping himself occupied in order to remain awake during the day. When subject to sexual temptation he once spent an entire night in mid-winter praying naked standing in a cistern of water.<sup>100</sup> He ate only once a day, and then only very limited foods.

He remained at Kellia until his death in c.399. During this time he became a respected teacher and, unusually, also the author of a series of important works. Amongst these were instructions on the monastic life (*The Foundations of Monastic Life: A Presentation of the Practice of Stillness*,<sup>101</sup> and *The Monk: A treatise on the Practical Life*<sup>102</sup>), numerous commentaries on scripture (including *Scholia* on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Psalms), various letters and most importantly for the present purpose some works on prayer and the inner life (*Chapters on Prayer*<sup>103</sup>, *On the Eight Thoughts*,<sup>104</sup> *On Thoughts*<sup>105</sup>, *Antirrhethikos*, *Gnostikos*, and the *Kephalaia Gnostica*). Some of these works<sup>106</sup> survive only in Latin, Armenian or Syriac translation.

During his lifetime, Evagrios remained a respected theologian and teacher on the spiritual life. After his death, as the works of



Origen were increasingly scrutinised and condemned as heretical. Evagrios' reputation began to suffer by association. Despite this, his works were widely circulated and translated into Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Arabic and various other languages. Eventually, Origen was condemned at the Second Ecumenical Council in 553, as were a series of beliefs held by Evagrios, and many copies of his works were subsequently destroyed.<sup>107</sup> Despite this, Evagrios' insights into prayer, the inner life and asceticism were still widely appreciated and were read and developed by others. That it was possible that this could happen was partly because his so-called theological works were separated from his ascetic and spiritual works, partly because of wide dissemination and translation, and also because some works were transmitted under other names (as indeed originally happened with one of his contributions to the *Philokalia*).

### i. *Foundations*

Taught by Makarios, Evagrios shared with the Desert Fathers a belief that inner stillness, hesychia, was facilitated by avoiding frequent or inappropriate social contacts, or any other external circumstances which might provide unnecessary agitation or distraction.<sup>108</sup> In *Foundations* he sets out the basics: celibacy, poverty, a frugal diet, living either alone or with like-minded brothers in the desert, avoidance of cities, infrequent contact with family and friends, undertaking basic manual labour so as not to be a burden on others, but avoidance of buying and selling where at all possible, and sleeping little and only on the ground. All these matters were, however, merely preliminary. His real concern was with the inner world of thoughts and it is here that he showed himself to be highly psychologically insightful and original. These “foundations” of the monastic life are put in place in order to attain and preserve an inner state of “stillness”<sup>109</sup> (ἡσυχία) and this in turn is preparatory to other things, which he deals with in his other works.

### ii. *Eight Thoughts*

In *Eight Thoughts*, Evagrios deals in turn with eight thoughts, or kinds of thoughts, each of which presents to the Christian a point of potential struggle or temptation. The material is presented as a series of brief paragraphs, often only one sentence long, under each



heading. These paragraphs take the form of proverbs, aphorisms, or wise sayings, or else admonitions and instructions. Allegory and metaphor are used liberally. Reference to, and quotation of, scripture is used to illustrate and justify, but some whole sections of the discourse (specifically on fornication and acedia) do not explicitly refer to scripture at all. Whilst the texts have a certain quality reminiscent of the sayings of the Desert Fathers, and presumably must have been derived, at least in part, from the same underlying oral tradition, the Fathers are not explicitly quoted. The texts appear to be offered for contemplation and reflection – to be prayed over and lived out rather than studied systematically in an academic fashion. One is left with the impression that they arise in turn from Evagrios' own reflections, and those of his mentors.

The list, which appears elsewhere in Evagrian work and is original to Evagrios, has been highly influential upon other authors – including authors of the *Philokalia*. Elsewhere, Evagrios states that “All the generic types of thoughts fall into [these] eight categories in which every sort of thought is included.”<sup>110</sup> The list comprises the following:

1. Gluttony
2. Fornication
3. Avarice
4. Anger
5. Sadness
6. Acedia
7. Vainglory
8. Pride

The title of this work refers to these items as being “thoughts”, but in other works (e.g. *On the Vices opposed to the Virtues*) they are referred to as vices, and in each case there is at least some reference here to an opposing virtue. In places the thoughts are also referred to as “passions” (e.g. Gluttony, #3; Fornication, #12; Avarice, #1). In other works (e.g. *Praktikos*), but interestingly not here, Evagrios refers to demons using the same names.

Gluttony, fornication and avarice are all concerned with desires that affect the concupiscible or appetitive aspect of the soul.<sup>111</sup> Anger



is concerned with “a boiling over”<sup>112</sup> of the irascible part of the soul. Elsewhere, Evagrios makes clear that sadness, vainglory and pride arise in the intelligent aspect of the soul, and that acedia arises from both the passible and intelligent aspects of the soul.<sup>113</sup>

Table 1.1 (pages 26-29) summarises Evagrios’ teaching on the eight thoughts. In each case, Evagrios proves to be a perceptive and diligent student, who has analysed the root causes, nature and consequences of the particular kind of thought. Gluttony is a fire fuelled by food, fornication is a wind that throws the ship of the soul off course, and avarice sinks that ship by weight of possessions. Anger is a form of madness, impairing the intellect, and sadness, which arises from frustration of anger or desire, is all consuming and all encompassing, like a devouring lion, or a prisoner’s bonds. Acedia is a wind that bends a delicate plant, but Evagrios notes that a wind also has the potential to strengthen a growing plant. Vainglory is the bindweed that saps away life, and the rock which causes shipwreck. Pride is a wound or infection that requires treatment by cautery or a scalpel if it is to be cured. Each of these thoughts, if not treated correctly, leads to its own particular consequences. They are inter-related and mutually reinforcing.

It is perhaps helpful here to say a little more about sadness and acedia, as these might represent more unexpected items in the list, at least to contemporary western minds. Evagrios refers to sadness as arising as a result of frustration of desire, or else closely following anger.<sup>114</sup> It is thus closely related to the other passions, but also similar to contemporary accounts of depression.<sup>115</sup> Acedia is “a relaxation of the soul which is not in accord with nature”.<sup>116</sup> It thus represents a lack of commitment to, or perseverance with, the vocation of the ascetic life and/or the life of prayer. These thoughts are therefore more significant in terms of where they arise from, and what they lead to. Like desire for food or sexual fulfilment, it is not so much that these thoughts are sinful in themselves – for they are most often uninvited – but rather they present temptations to something else.

Evagrios also proves perceptive in his analysis of various trains of thought and sequences of events. Thus, for example, in his section on fornication he includes a much longer than usual paragraph (2.8), in which he traces the typical course of a series of interactions of a monk and a woman. At first encounter, modesty and chastity prevail. At a second encounter, the gaze has changed subtly, and at a third encounter eye contact has been made. Eventually, the soul is



Table 1.1: Definitions, allegories and consequences of the thoughts described by Evagrius in *Eight Thoughts*

Passion	Definition	Allegory and Metaphor		Consequences
Gluttony	Not defined here, but: “gluttony is the mother of licentiousness” (2.1)	Wood as fuel for a fire (1.4-1.6, 1.27, 1.33)	Wood = food Gluttony = fire	Disobedience (10) Licentiousness/fornication (11, 34) Darkens the mind (13, 15, 16) Inhibits prayer (12, 14, 19) Blunts the intellect (17) Shameful thoughts (18) Contrary to impassibility (25)
Fornication	Not defined here, but: “The demon of fornication compels one to desire various bodies.” ( <i>Praktikos</i> 8)	Oil lamp (2.2)	Oil = encounters with women Flame = pleasure	Disregard for life (14) Pleasure (17, 20) Desire (20)
		Ship without ballast battered by waves (2.3)	Waves = thought of fornication Ship = intemperate	
		Festering wound caused by poisoned arrow (2.6-2.7)	Arrow = sight of a woman Wounded body = wounded soul	
		Plant that flourishes near water (2.10)	Water = encounters with women Plant = “passion of licentiousness”	
		Pillar erected on a base (2.12)	Pillar = fornication Base = satiety	



Passion	Definition	Allegory and Metaphor		Consequences
Fornication (continued)		Ship caught in a storm which hastens towards a harbour (2.13)	Ship = chaste soul Waves = "forms of women" Harbour = solitude	
Avarice	"Avarice is the root of all evils (1 Tim 6:10), and it nourishes the remaining passions like evil branches." (3.1)	Root and branch (3.1-3.2)	Root = avarice Branch = other passions	Other passions (1) Sadness (7) Unsatisfied desire (8)
		Heavily laden/leaky boat that easily sinks in a sea storm (3.3)	Boat = person (monk) Load = possessions Waves = concerns	
Anger	"Anger is a passion that leads to madness and easily drives those who possess it out of their senses: it makes the soul wild and moves it to shun all (human) encounter." (4.1)	Water driven by the wind (4.3)	Wind = "senseless thoughts" Water = "the irascible person"	Madness (1) Shunning human company (1) Impairment of the intellect (5, 9) Darkening of the mind (6) Bloodshot eyes (10) Separation from God (14) Inhibits prayer (16, 18)
		Mist that thickens the air (4.5)	Mist = "movement of irascibility" Air = intellect	
		Cloud that darkens the sun (4.6)	Cloud = thought of resentment Sun = mind	
		Lion rattling the hinges of its cage (4.7)	Lion = person (monk) Hinges of cage = thoughts of anger	
		A stone which troubles the water into which it falls (4.15)	Stone = an evil word Water = the human heart	



Passion	Definition	Allegory and Metaphor		Consequences
Sadness	“Sadness is a dejection of the soul and is constituted from thoughts of anger, for irascibility is a longing for revenge, and the frustration of revenge produces sadness.” (5.1) In <i>Praktikos</i> , Evagrius also speaks of sadness as arising from frustrated desire (10)	A devouring lion (5.2)	Maw of the lion = sadness That which is devoured = person afflicted by sadness	Suffering (4) Loss of spiritual pleasure (5) Inhibits prayer (6, 7, 21, 22) Dulling of the mind (21)
		A bound prisoner who cannot run (5.7-5.8)	Fetters/bonds = sadness Prisoner = person Running = contemplation	
Acedia	“Acedia is a relaxation of the soul, and a relaxation of the soul which is not in accord with nature does not resist temptations nobly.” (6.1)	A north wind that nourishes young plants (6.2)	North wind = temptations Plants = Endurance of the soul	Wandering restlessness (5, 8, 10, 11, 13) Service undertaken for selfish motives (6, 7) Dissatisfaction with work (12, 16) Distraction (14, 15) Laziness in prayer (16)
		A waterless cloud chased away by the wind (6.3)	Cloud = mind without perseverance Wind = acedia	
		A light breeze that bends a feeble plant (6.8)	Breeze = fantasy about a trip away Plant = monk overcome by acedia	
		A well rooted tree not shaken by the wind (6.9)	Tree = firmly established soul Wind = acedia	
		A sick person not satisfied with a single type of food (6.12)	Sick person = monk afflicted by acedia Food = type of work	



Passion	Definition	Allegory and Metaphor		Consequences
Acedia (continued)		A pleasure loving man dissatisfied with one wife (6.13)	Man = monk given to acedia Wife = cell	
		A sick person who cannot carry a heavy burden (6.16)	Sick person = person afflicted by acedia Burden = work of God	
Vainglory	"Vainglory is an irrational passion and it readily gets tangled up with any work of virtue." (7.1)	Bindweed entangled around a tree so that its roots are killed (7.2)	Bindweed = vainglory Roots = virtues	Destroys virtues (2, 3, 5, 17) Impairs prayer (8) Makes enemies (15)
		Wind that wipes out a footprint (7.7)	Wind = vainglory Footprint = almsgiving	
		A ship that loses its cargo when running against an underwater rock (7.9)	Underwater rock = vainglory Cargo = virtues (implied)	
Pride	"Pride is a tumour of the soul filled with pus; when it has ripened, it will rupture and create a great disgusting mess." (8.1)	A flash of lightning which foretells thunder (8.2)	Lightning = vainglory Thunder = pride	Ruins virtue (8) Ferrifying fantasies & attacks of demons (10) Boasting (18) Impairing of prayer (19)
		A vine prop supporting a young branch weighed down with fruit (8.9 & 8.8)	Vine prop = fear of God Branch = virtuous soul Weight of fruit = pride	
		A tree without roots which cannot withstand the wind (8.14)	Tree = proud person (monk)	
		A long-standing infection/wound cured by cautery (& scalpel) (8.30 – 8.31)	Infection = habit of vainglory (& pride) Cautery/scalpel = dishonour & sadness	



besieged by the interaction; it has become “entangling”, destructive and poisonous. Similarly, in the section on acedia (6.15), he provides an amusing account of a monk who is supposed to be reading. But this monk finds himself yawning, stretching, looking at the wall, counting pages, and jumping to the end. If he gives in to sleep, Evagrius observes, then he will find himself awakened by hunger.

Apparently innocent, or even good, thoughts and actions may thus lead to undesirable outcomes. Elsewhere, Evagrius goes further and suggests that beneath the apparently innocent thought or action there lays another motive. For example:

A person afflicted with acedia proposes visiting the sick, but is fulfilling his own purpose.<sup>117</sup>

Evagrius is not specific here as to whether such a person consciously intends proposing visitation of the sick for ulterior purposes.<sup>118</sup> The possibility is left open that they might not have insight into their own motivation. Thus, being unaware of the dynamics of such thoughts, they may be deceiving themselves more than others as to their true purpose. However, once having read these passages, it is Evagrius’ expectation that the monk will no longer be able to claim ignorance of what is really going on in his (or, we might add, her) own mind.

The context and purpose of considering each of these eight thoughts is clearly that of facilitating a life of virtue and of prayer. Thus, for example, in the section on gluttony we find:

The smoke of incense sweetens the air, and the prayer of the abstinent person presents a sweet odour to God (cf. Rev. 8:4).<sup>119</sup>

Or again, in the section on vainglory:

Vainglory advises you to pray in the streets, but he who wars against it prays in his chamber (cf. Matt. 6:5-6).<sup>120</sup>

However, the work does not treat of prayer itself, and is generally considered to be an introductory work for the monk who is in the early stages of monastic life.

### iii. *Praktikos*

*Praktikos* takes things on a further stage. It deals again with the eight thoughts, saying a little about the nature of each and then providing



more or less brief suggestions for remedies against each of them. However, it then develops a more general discussion about the passions and the part that sense perceptions and demons play in provoking them. This provides the introduction to a series of instructions for dealing with these things including, for example, attentiveness to one's thoughts, that one might get to know better the tactics of the demons. It then moves on to a discussion of impassibility.

Impassibility (ἀπάθεια), or dispassion as it is usually translated in the *Philokalia*, is concerned with impartiality or detachment, with peace or tranquillity, but not with absence of suffering.<sup>121</sup> It is translated by Cassian as “purity of heart”.<sup>122</sup> According to Evagrius, impassibility is encountered after victory is gained over the demons/passions.<sup>123</sup> It is the “blossom” of the practical life and, in turn, gives birth to love.<sup>124</sup> Although he does not develop the theme here, it is also the gateway to the first type of contemplative prayer – that of the contemplation of the essence of created beings.<sup>125</sup>

*Praktikos* closes with further practical advice about the ascetic life and then with some sayings of the Desert Fathers.

#### iv. *On Thoughts*

*On Thoughts* takes things on a further stage and provides a more detailed account of the mental life and especially of the struggle against the demons. It is clear that this is all in aid of attaining “pure prayer”, but again little is said about that in this work. The work rather appears to be preparatory for that end; it is written for the monk who is striving to achieve impassibility.<sup>126</sup>

In *On Thoughts*, three thoughts – those of gluttony, avarice and vainglory – are seen as being of fundamental importance. Demons are understood as being at work in these thoughts: as suggesting them, enticing human beings with them, and as being “entrusted” with them.<sup>127</sup> It is these thoughts/demons which open the way to all the others and it is these three with which Jesus is understood as having been tempted in the wilderness.<sup>128</sup> Further, all demonic thoughts are understood as entering the soul through “mental representations of sensible objects”.<sup>129</sup> It is not all such mental images, or memories, that are necessarily demonic, but rather those that are associated with “irascibility or concupiscibility contrary to nature”.<sup>130</sup> In other words, these thoughts arouse the desiring and incensive aspects of the soul in a way which is likely to lead to sinful behaviour and



which prevents the intellect from perceiving the image of God. This may happen in sleep as well as in wakefulness.<sup>131</sup>

Thoughts are understood by Evagrios as originating from angels, from demons or from the human mind. He uses as an example thoughts of gold. Angelic thoughts may be about why God created gold, how it is referred to in the Bible and the holy purposes to which it may be put. Demonic thoughts will be about selfish acquisition of gold and the pleasures that this will bring. Human thoughts neither investigate divine purpose, nor indulge selfish passion, but rather appear to be a dispassionate imaging of gold by the intellect.<sup>132</sup>

Later, “mental representations”, by which he appears to be referring to the neutral images that are human thoughts, are metaphorically referred to as sheep which have been entrusted to human beings as to a shepherd.<sup>133</sup> These sheep are vulnerable to wolves or other wild beasts. The extended metaphor becomes a little confusing as it is developed because he first refers to wolves as being another kind of mental representation (by implication associated inappropriately with passion), but then goes on to refer to sheep being snatched by wild beasts when inappropriately pastured – e.g. when the mental representation of a brother is “pastured with hatred”. On the one hand it appears that he considers wolves to be impassioned mental representations, but on the other hand he appears to consider wild beasts to be the potentially ravaging activities of the respective parts of the soul – incensive, desiring or intellective. It is clear, however, that he considers that the incensive and desiring aspects of the soul do have fundamentally good purposes. The proper function of the incensive part is to chase off the wolves, and the function of the desiring part is to nurture the sheep. Although he does not explicitly say so here, it is also more or less implicit that the proper function of the intellect is prayer.

In *On Thoughts*, Evagrios also introduces some new demons. Amongst these are “vagabond” and “insensibility”.<sup>134</sup> Each is attributed, as are all the demons, with purposeful motivation to lead the soul away from God. The former does this by means of wandering, purposeless and irrelevant thoughts which at first simply occupy the mental space which otherwise might have been taken by knowledge of God, and then lead on to other thoughts, or rather demons, which more directly lead away from virtue and from God. The latter acts by diminishing the soul’s sense of the seriousness of sin and of the fear of God. Later in this work, Evagrios also develops an account of the strategies of the demons, especially giving consideration to



the circumstances of the monk who has been in combat with them for some time. For example, he talks of the way in which they follow in succession in their assaults – stronger ones following on from weaker ones – and of how they may change their tactic from (for example) a temptation to gluttony to a temptation to excessive asceticism.<sup>135</sup> (Such a temptation is still put into the mind by the demon of gluttony; it is simply gluttony in another form.)

The purpose of Evagrios' account of the demons is to arm the monk to fight against them. Thus, for example, he encourages his reader to be self-reflective about where his thoughts are led by "vagabond", in order that he can more easily recognise his influence, expose it and resist it.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, if a demon introduces a thought of avarice, the reader is encouraged to analyse the way in which it is not the object itself, or the mind or the mental representation of the object that is sinful, but rather a hostile desire to put the object to an improper use.<sup>137</sup>

Impassibility is seen here as being more nearly attainable than it was in *Praktikos*. For example, advice is given about how to test whether or not it has been attained.<sup>138</sup> There is also a concluding account of the need for freedom from mental representations as a pre-requisite for contemplative prayer.<sup>139</sup> Contemplative prayer (or more correctly "pure" prayer) is the goal towards which Evagrios has been leading his pupils and which is now coming into sight. His treatment of this for his more advanced pupils is first contained in *On Prayer*, a work which was originally included in the *Philokalia* under attribution to Neilos of Ancyra.

## v. On Prayer

Prayer is defined by Evagrios as "a communion of the mind with God"<sup>140</sup> and as "the ascent of the mind towards God".<sup>141</sup> His vision of prayer is much broader than these succinct definitions might appear to imply. In fact, he sees it as taking in the whole breadth of the ascetic life. However, at its heart, "true prayer" or "pure prayer" is the goal of the ascetic life and is something that is not easily attained.

For Evagrios, "the way of prayer ... is ... twofold: it involves the practical on the one hand and the contemplative on the other".<sup>142</sup> The practical life, as understood by Evagrios, is concerned with overcoming the "thoughts" (or vices, or passions) that he has dealt with at some length in his other works, and especially in *Praktikos*, as described above.<sup>143</sup> It represents a struggle against the demons,



the outcome of which is impassibility.<sup>144</sup> It paves the way for contemplative prayer.<sup>145</sup>

Contemplative prayer is understood by Evagrios as comprising natural contemplation and theological contemplation.<sup>146</sup> Although these kinds of contemplation are nowhere precisely defined in *On Prayer*, it is already fairly clear here that natural contemplation is concerned with contemplation of natural, or created, beings, and theological contemplation is concerned with contemplation of God himself. The distinction between these is very important. In comparison with the latter, the former hardly qualifies as prayer at all. Thus, for example, Evagrios warns that natural contemplation can lead the mind “far away from God”.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, natural contemplation is eventually incompatible with the contemplation of God himself. Contemplation of God is free of the images and intellections associated with created things.<sup>148</sup> Natural contemplation is contemplation of the many, theological contemplation is contemplation of the One.<sup>149</sup>

*On Prayer* thus begins with a consideration of the practical life insofar as it relates directly to the subject of prayer. This includes a reminder of the need to attend to the virtues,<sup>150</sup> the merit of tears,<sup>151</sup> the need to avoid distractions<sup>152</sup> and anger,<sup>153</sup> and the likelihood that the demons will oppose the efforts of the monk to pray.<sup>154</sup> The reader is enjoined not to pray for his<sup>155</sup> own needs, but rather that God’s will be done.<sup>156</sup> However, all of this is, yet again, merely preliminary to the task in hand.

Prayer, Evagrios tells us, is all about God. Prayer is about loving God, being in communion with God,<sup>157</sup> being near to God,<sup>158</sup> beholding the “place of God”,<sup>159</sup> longing for God,<sup>160</sup> and journeying with God.<sup>161</sup> Prayer is bestowed by God.<sup>162</sup>

If God himself is the destination of a journey then the journey begins with pursuit of virtue, in order to get to the place of natural contemplation, which in turn leads to the contemplation of the Logos himself.<sup>163</sup> Prayer is a focus on God which is blind to all distractions. Initially, and most fundamentally, these distractions are from the passions, but as the soul draws nearer to God it becomes blind even to the distractions offered by natural contemplation of corporeal, or even incorporeal, beings.<sup>164</sup> And so, Evagrios turns at last to the focus of pure prayer, which is God himself.

He warns that God cannot be contemplated in the form of any image.<sup>165</sup> God is immaterial, without quantity or form. Attempts to approach God in this way are therefore either misguided human



effort, or demonically inspired. On the other hand, for the soul that is receptive, God graciously bestows prayer, sending his angels to oppose demonic activity, to provide illumination and to instil “knowledge of true prayer”.<sup>166</sup> Whilst this appears to be the climax of Evagrios’ *On Prayer*, it can easily feel as though it is an anti-climax. Pure prayer remains an unimaginable and undescribed mystery for it is communion with God who is imageless, and the imageless cannot be imagined or described. Whilst there is much that can be done to make the soul receptive to God, pure prayer is ultimately the gift of God and so Evagrios urges patience.<sup>167</sup>

Perhaps this accounts for the shift of focus at this point to something that sounds at first as though it ought to have been in Lesson 1 – the matter of psalmody.<sup>168</sup> Psalmody, Evagrios urges, “puts the passions to sleep”<sup>169</sup> and prepares the mind for prayer. Although he implies here that it is a form of natural contemplation, he clearly sees this as being a good way to maintain a patient readiness for God to bestow theological contemplation or pure prayer.<sup>170</sup> But there is some ambiguity, for psalmody is both something which he urges his reader practise, and also something which, like pure prayer, is graciously bestowed by God.<sup>171</sup>

The structure of the work from this point on is curious. Sinkewicz, in his translation, groups together paragraphs 89 to 105 under the heading of “Trials”, paragraphs 106 to 112 under the heading of “Apophthegmata” and then 113-153 as a concluding miscellany. The Apophthegmata might be taken as undergirding what has gone before with the authority of the Desert Fathers or, perhaps more likely, as providing examples to encourage patience and perseverance. The other paragraphs provide a return to earlier themes – such as the need to be wary of the attacks of the demons, and the imagelessness of true prayer. Perhaps these also are offered as encouragements to perseverance, even when the path towards prayer seems to be opposed by demons and when their proffered images of God might appear seductive. Whatever the intention may have been, the work ends on a positive note:

When you have passed beyond every other joy in your prayer, then you have truly discovered the practice of prayer.<sup>172</sup>

After the battle with the passions is won, when the demons have been defeated, when patience has been rewarded by God’s gracious



bestowal of prayer, when the seduction of that which can be imagined and described has been rebuffed, the “theology” that is the contemplation of God in prayer offers more joy than anything else possibly could. It is clear, however, that this is still just the beginning.

### vi. *Gnostikos*

In *Gnostikos*, we learn more. It appears to have been intended as part of a trilogy – *Praktikos*, *Gnostikos*, and *Kephalaia Gnostika*.<sup>173</sup> It comprises 50 chapters, which are devoted largely to the subject of contemplative knowledge, for this is the primary concern of the “gnostikos”, the “one who knows”. However, this is not to say that the practical or ascetical life can now be forgotten. There are repeated reminders against such things as anger,<sup>174</sup> sadness,<sup>175</sup> avarice,<sup>176</sup> vainglory,<sup>177</sup> and gluttony.<sup>178</sup> Vice and virtue are still important concerns.<sup>179</sup> Knowledge cannot be acquired by one who is still immersed in the passions.<sup>180</sup>

According to *Gnostikos*, there are two kinds of knowledge: that derived by the senses from the external, material, world, and that derived interiorly by grace.<sup>181</sup> *Gnostikos* is concerned, however, not so much with these kinds of knowledge in themselves, as with what might be expected of the gnostikos. In addition to exhortations about vice and virtue, which have already been mentioned, advice is given on what may or may not be said to others,<sup>182</sup> and on what it is “necessary” or “good” to know.<sup>183</sup> Interestingly, speaking about God “without [careful] consideration” is warned against.<sup>184</sup> However, in contrast, Evagrius apparently considers it important to advise on “causes of abandonment” or reasons why God might withdraw from the soul for its own good. These include the revealing of virtue, punishment which leads to renewal of virtue, the salvation of others, humility, and hatred of evil.<sup>185</sup> Evagrius warns against going beyond one’s knowledge, or imagining that one knows more than one actually does.<sup>186</sup>

Rather as *On Prayer* closes with a series of apophthegmata, drawing on the authority of the Desert Fathers, *Gnostikos* closes with a series of quotations from various authorities, including Basil of Caesarea, Athanasius, and Didymus the Blind.<sup>187</sup> Two final chapters tantalisingly suggest that the goal of the life of knowledge is merely a preparation for something else: theology, a restoring gaze upon God himself.



The goal of the *praktike* is to purify the intellect and to render it free of passions; that of the *gnostike* is to reveal the truth hidden in all beings; but to distance the intellect from matter and to turn it towards the First Cause – this is a gift of theology.

Gazing fixedly upon the archetype, I strive to engrave the images without neglecting anything which might accomplish the gaining [back] of the fallen-away.<sup>188</sup>

### vii. *Kephalaia Gnostika*

We are thus taken, eventually, to *Kephalaia Gnostika*, the final part of the trilogy, in the hope of learning more about exactly what Evagrius understands contemplative prayer to be. However, as David Bundy has commented, this work is “deliberately disjointed and cryptic, intended only for those who are already committed to an ascetic life and who have the intellectual background to read the ‘encoded’ instructions”.<sup>189</sup> It is clearly intended to be read only by those who are advanced in the life of prayer, and have already achieved *apatheia*. Even then, it appears to be something intended as a basis for contemplation – not something which is to be read from beginning to end in a logical sequence of argument. It is, after all, offered as an aid to the person seeking God, who is beyond all words and images, and any encounter with whom is inevitably ineffable. All of this said, we find out some interesting things here about contemplative prayer.

Firstly, contemplation is a kind of vision of the soul:

THE sense, naturally by itself, senses sensory things, but the mind [*nous*] always stands and waits [to ascertain] which spiritual contemplation gives it vision.<sup>190</sup>

Secondly, and connected with this metaphorical vision, contemplation is concerned with knowledge, of God, of Christ, and of created beings:

THE light of the *nous* is divided into three:  
knowledge of the adorable and holy Trinity;  
and the incorporeal nature that created by it;  
and the contemplation of beings.<sup>191</sup>

Knowledge of created things is concerned with their *λόγοι*, their inner essences or meanings. It is *apatheia* that enables this knowledge, or vision, of the inner essences of things:



THE *nous* that is divested of the passions and sees the *logoi* of beings does not henceforth truly receive the *eidola* that (arrive) through the senses; but it is as if another world is created by its knowledge, attracting to it its thought and rejecting far from it the sensitive world.<sup>192</sup>

Knowledge of God, however, is importantly different to the knowledge that is the concern of contemplation of created beings. God is “essential knowledge”, never simply an “object” of contemplation.<sup>193</sup> Spiritual contemplation therefore remains, ultimately, a mystery.<sup>194</sup> Amongst many aspects of this mystery, however, Evagrios returns repeatedly to his vision of God as both Unity<sup>195</sup> and Trinity,<sup>196</sup> and of Christ as existing in unique relationship both to God and human beings.<sup>197</sup>

Thirdly, contemplation is transformative:

JUST as the senses are changed through being receptive of different qualities, so also the *nous* is changed, [through] constant gazing at diverse contemplations.<sup>198</sup>

Contemplation is healing,<sup>199</sup> generative,<sup>200</sup> brings growth and life,<sup>201</sup> is restorative,<sup>202</sup> and even deifying.<sup>203</sup> Contemplation of the *logoi* of judgement and providence appear to assume a particular significance in this process. For Evagrios, “judgement” is a matter of God’s progressive transformation of reasoning beings (λογικοί, a category which includes but is not confined to human beings) in order to assist their spiritual development, and “providence” is a matter of God’s provision of what is required to return them to the union with God from which they are fallen.<sup>204</sup>

Fourthly, Evagrios provides us with a definition of contemplation:

CONTEMPLATION is:  
spiritual knowledge of the things which have been and will be:  
it is this which causes the *nous* to ascend to its first rank.<sup>205</sup>

Contemplation is defined, therefore, in terms of knowledge and of salvation of the human soul. Commenting on this definition, Dysinger suggests that we should see here a Christological and soteriological basis for the Evagrian theology of contemplation. Because God in Christ has both descended and ascended, the contemplative who,



by definition, has fallen from his primordial state is also enabled to ascend towards [knowledge of] God.<sup>206</sup>

Fifthly, there are different kinds of contemplation. We have already seen that “natural” and “theological” contemplation are to be distinguished. However, in *Kephalaia Gnostika*, the classification becomes much more complex and inconsistent. There appears to be an expectation of progress from “second” to “first” natural contemplation:

VIRTUES cause the *nous* to see second natural contemplation; and the latter cause it to see first [natural contemplation]; and the first in its turn (makes it see) the Blessed Unity.<sup>207</sup>

Terminology of first and second natural contemplation occurs in Evagrian literature only in *Kephalaia Gnostika*, and nowhere else.<sup>208</sup> There are also references to up to five kinds of contemplation:

FIVE are the principal contemplations under which all contemplation is placed. It is said that the first is contemplation of the adorable and holy Trinity; the second and third are the contemplation of incorporeal beings and of bodies; the fourth and the fifth are the contemplation of judgment and of providence.<sup>209</sup>

Elsewhere, a different five-fold order is presented:

WITH God is said to be: first, the one who knows the Holy Trinity; and next after him one who contemplates the *logoi* concerning the intelligible [beings]; third, then, is one who also sees the incorporeal beings; and then fourth is one who understands the contemplation of the ages; while one who has attained apatheia of his soul is justly to be accounted fifth.<sup>210</sup>

And elsewhere again different two and three fold orders are presented.<sup>211</sup>

All of this is not easy to disentangle and the tangle is made no easier to unravel by the virtual interchangeability of the terms “contemplation” and “knowledge”,<sup>212</sup> as well as an at times rather mystical use of the term “contemplation” in relation to Christ himself.<sup>213</sup> If the tangle can be unravelled, it is clear that Evagrios only expects us to unravel it in the practice of contemplative prayer itself.



What is finally clear is that contemplative knowledge of God, Unity and Trinity, is the aim of the Evagrian system.

## 5. Scripture

Scriptural quotations, allusions and references are pervasive within the text of the *Philokalia*. Scripture is used to justify, illustrate, explain and facilitate the themes which the authors take up. Again, with a work spanning so many centuries, it is not surprising to find that there are differences in frequency and style of reference, as well as in theological approach, to scripture. Thus, for example, there appears to be far more frequent explicit reference to scripture in the works of Peter of Damoskos than in any other author. However, the foundational importance of scripture to all of the authors of the *Philokalia* is evident<sup>214</sup> and so it deserves some further consideration here.

Scripture is used again and again as justification for the ideas that are expressed in the *Philokalia*, even to the point of appearing to a modern reader to be contrived. Thus, for example, in *Guarding the Intellect*, by Isaiah the Solitary, we find a series of quotations from the Psalms used as authority for the hesychastic concept of “guarding of the heart”:

Holy Scripture speaks everywhere about the guarding of the heart, in both the Old and the New Testaments. David says in the Psalms: ‘O sons of men, how long will you be heavy of heart?’ (Ps. 4:2. LXX), and again: ‘Their heart is vain’ (Ps. 5:9. LXX); and of those who think futile thoughts, he says: ‘For he has said in his heart, I shall not be moved’ (Ps. 10:6), and: ‘He has said in his heart, God has forgotten’ (Ps. 10:11).<sup>215</sup>

It is not at all evident to us that such examples show that scripture speaks anywhere, let alone “everywhere”, about guarding of the heart in the sense understood within the hesychastic tradition. In order to understand this apparently curious use of scripture we must consider the nature of the hermeneutical tools employed within the *Philokalia*. However, what must first be affirmed is that the authors of the *Philokalia* share an understanding that scripture provides foundational authority for their theology, anthropology, psychology and spirituality. Even if we, or their contemporaries, might argue that



their use of scripture is flawed, the important point for them appears to be that they are able to argue that what they believe about the inner life and prayer can be shown to be consistent with scripture and not alien to it. In this sense, even the later writers appear ultimately to rely not on tradition but rather on scriptural authority for what they teach.

We should not, however, allow this reliance on scripture as authority to mislead us into thinking that scripture was primarily either a source of theological concepts and ideas or the means of justifying such concepts and ideas when they were drawn from elsewhere. The *Philokalia* is concerned primarily with prayer, and with the virtuous life as an essential basis for prayer, and so the importance of scripture is primarily as an aid to prayer and a guide to virtue. Thus, for example, Hesychios the Priest warns against an approach to scripture that avoids confrontation with its implications for practical living:

He who does not know the truth cannot truly have faith: for by nature knowledge precedes faith. What is said in Scripture is said not solely for us to understand, but also for us to act upon.<sup>216</sup>

Further, meditation on scripture provides a means of approaching God in prayer. For example John of Karpathos, in *For the Monks in India*, states that:

nothing so readily renews the decrepit soul, and enables it to approach the Lord, as fear of God, attentiveness, constant meditation on the words of Scripture, the arming of oneself with prayer, and spiritual progress through the keeping of vigils.<sup>217</sup>

Scripture is thus understood not as an end in itself but as a means of assisting the soul in its approach to God. Maximos the Confessor therefore warns that, if used incorrectly, scripture can hinder rather than assist in this process.<sup>218</sup> On the other hand, correctly used, scripture provides an essential aid to the intellect in its ascent to God.<sup>219</sup>

On the one hand, then, the writers of the *Philokalia* understand scripture as interpreting the human condition<sup>220</sup> and leading the soul towards God. On the other hand, however, this process assumes that the human soul is also capable of properly interpreting scripture.



This reflexive hermeneutical process is largely implicit within the *Philokalia*, but it is an important one. Most frequently, it appears to assume the form of allegory.

Allegory is to be found everywhere in the Patristic interpretation of scripture, and is certainly not unique to the *Philokalia*. Both the European Reformation and the Enlightenment have left a deep distrust of such an approach, which is seen as lacking in objectivity both theologically (because it supposedly avoids encounter with the divinely revealed truth contained in scripture) and scientifically (because it is perceived as the antithesis of the historical-critical method, making almost no effort to discern the “original” meaning of the text).<sup>221</sup> However, to approach the *Philokalia* with this kind of distrust is to completely misunderstand the Patristic method and purpose of allegorical interpretation. It is also to ignore the way in which modern hermeneutical thinking and Patristic allegorical interpretation of scripture both recognise that in fact texts are capable of multiple meanings and that the “original” meaning (if indeed that is accessible at all) is not the only possible valid one. Most importantly, it fails to appreciate the mystery, richness and depth that the Fathers found in scripture. Allegorical interpretation, understood in this way, is not a flawed method for uncovering objective meaning, it is rather (at least in the present, Christian, sense) an exploration of the mystery of God in Christ. It is, in fact, prayer.

Examples of allegory abound within the pages of the *Philokalia*. For example, John Cassian interprets “the wicked of the earth” and “the children of Babylon”, in Psalms 101 and 137 respectively, as being wicked thoughts.<sup>222</sup> The story of Ish-bosheth and his doorkeeper, in 2 Samuel 4:5-8, is interpreted by Neilos the Ascetic as referring to the intellect and reason.<sup>223</sup> Maximos interprets Jacob’s well, in John 4:5-15, as a reference to scripture itself.<sup>224</sup> Nikitas Stithatos interprets the bread/food, the wine, and the oil, referred to in Psalms 104:15 and 23:5 as references to scripture, each in respect of a different stage of the spiritual life.<sup>225</sup>

Peter of Damaskos appears to be alone amongst the authors of the *Philokalia* in his expression of reservation at this hermeneutical method. Ironically, he expresses this reservation in the context of an approving reference in *Book II* to an allegorical interpretation of John 10:1 by Maximos the Confessor, and further uses the same allegory himself in the course of his argument:



If, however, a thief or robber tries to enter, not by the proper door, but by ‘climbing up some other way’, as the Lord puts it (John 10:1), then the sheep – that is, according to St Maximos, divine thoughts – pay no attention to him. For the thief enters only so that he can deceive by hearsay, and kill the Scriptures by turning them into allegory, since he is unable to interpret them spiritually. Thus through his presumption and his pseudo-knowledge he destroys both himself and the divine thoughts contained in the Scriptures. But the shepherd, as a good soldier of Christ, feels compassion for these thoughts; and by keeping the divine commandments he enters in through the narrow gate (cf. Matt. 7:13), the gate of humility and dispassion. Before receiving divine grace he devotes himself to studying and to learning about everything by listening to others; and whenever the wolf approaches in the guise of a sheep (cf. Matt. 7:15), he chases him off by means of self-criticism, saying, ‘I do not know who you are: God knows.’ And should a thought approach shamelessly and ask to be received, saying to him, ‘If you do not watch over thoughts and discriminate between things, you are ignorant and lacking in faith’, then he replies, ‘If you call me a fool, I accept the title; for like St John Chrysostom I know that whoever is foolish in this world becomes wise, as St Paul puts it’ (cf. 1 Cor. 3:18).<sup>226</sup>

The intent of this discourse, in which thoughts are allegorically understood as sheep in both John 10 and Matthew 7, appears not so much to be an injunction against the use of allegory altogether (for that would invalidate both his own use of allegory, and that of Maximos) but rather a warning against “presumption” and “pseudo-knowledge” which may be displayed in the inappropriate use of allegory by those unable to interpret the scriptures “spiritually”.<sup>227</sup> Like Maximos, Peter therefore seems to be concerned about the possible misinterpretation of scripture by those who are not as wise as they would like to imagine. The solution – of “spiritual” interpretation<sup>228</sup> – appears to be a combination of humility and dispassion, obedience to scriptural commands, willingness to learn from others, and a preparedness to appear foolish, if necessary, in being ready to admit to not knowing how to interpret. In other words, proper interpretation relies – at least



in part – upon acquisition of dispassion and virtue, but is ultimately a matter of the grace of God. A similar model is given expression elsewhere in the *Philokalia* by Diadochos of Photiki:

Spiritual knowledge comes through prayer, deep stillness and complete detachment, while wisdom comes through humble meditation on Holy Scripture and, above all, through grace given by God.<sup>229</sup>

Here, interpretation of scripture begins to sound much more like contemplative prayer, and indeed other authors of the *Philokalia* also speak of it in this way. For example, we find Maximos the Confessor writing in *Various Texts: C'5*:

As soon as anyone practises the virtues with true intelligence, he acquires a spiritual understanding of Scripture. He worships God actively in the new way of the Spirit through the higher forms of contemplation, and not in the old way of the written, code (cf. Rom. 7:6), which makes man interpret the Law in an outward and sensual manner and, Judaic-like, fosters the passions and encourages sin.<sup>230</sup>

Spiritual interpretation of scripture thus appears to be itself a form of contemplative prayer.

In some ways, this hermeneutic might be regarded as a hermeneutic of suspicion, for it recognises that human beings have a capacity to deceive themselves and it encourages the interpreter of scripture to distrust his or her own interpretation until finding confirmation of it elsewhere in scripture, or from those who are holier and wiser.<sup>231</sup> However, perhaps the terminology of suspicion is anachronistic here, for it evokes an age of scriptural interpretation informed by Freud, Nietzsche and Ricoeur and this is clearly not the world in which Peter of Damaskos lived. Rather, we should consider this to be a hermeneutic of humility, which recognises that the interpretation of scripture depends upon the grace of God, that no single interpretation is likely to exhaust its meaning, and that there are always others holier and wiser against whose interpretations one's own thoughts must be tested.

This is not a completely pre-critical hermeneutical model. We have seen already that it is critical at the personal, subjective, level. Neither does it eschew academic study, although it does place this



in a broader context of the virtuous life and of prayer. It is also capable of accommodating source-critical comments, such as when we find John Cassian making reference to the reliability of the “best manuscripts”.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, it is a rich source of critical reflection, insofar as it values the criticism offered by the interpretations of tradition.<sup>233</sup> However, it is not critical in a modern academic sense. Thus, for example, Peter of Damaskos appears unwilling to countenance the possibility that St Paul did not write the epistle to the Hebrews, or that Dionysios did not write the texts attributed to him. Moreover, his arguments against alternative authorship of these texts appear to reflect his own contemplative intuition, presumably reinforced by a sense of what he understood that tradition had taught on such matters.

The hermeneutic most frequently encountered in the *Philokalia* thus appears to be a contemplative one. Any tendency towards extreme subjectivism is checked by the emphasis on humility and the appeal to the traditions of the Church. This might be criticised as making it inherently conservative. However, it is also radically reflective and reflexive. It emphasises scripture as a place of personal encounter with the Logos of God.

## 6. Conclusions

The influences upon, and foundations of, the *Philokalia* that have been considered here together reflect a focus on finding God within the human soul. Evagrios was himself a part of the tradition of the Egyptian desert, and the compilers of the *Philokalia* merely collated and passed on texts that they inherited. On this basis, one could argue that the three foundations of the *Philokalia* are actually scripture, tradition and reason, where the primary tradition is that of the Desert Fathers, and the primary appeal to reason is that of Plato. However, this would be to gloss over the enormous original contribution made by Evagrios, who translated and made sense of the Christian traditions of the Egyptian desert in a highly perceptive way. If the anthropology of the *Philokalia* is fundamentally Platonic, then surely its psychology is fundamentally Evagrian.